

The LURE of PERIL

STAKED OUT TO DIE BY THE MAYAS

By Col. Etienne Bazin



A FEW weeks ago as I was sailing from Southampton I stood at the ship's rail just as we were getting out into the stream and on the dock, seeing some friends off for America apparently, was a big, dark-faced man the sight of whose visage sent a sudden thrill through me. I had seen him once only before, had never known his name and yet I owed him my life. He saw me waving and heard me shouting to him, recognized me and saluted, then was lost in the crowd. Quer, wasn't it? yet no stranger than the story of my first meeting with him.

It was in 1902 that I came back from Africa with about five different sorts of fever in me and I believe I should have died if I had remained in the north. My physician suggested that I return to the tropics or rather the sub-tropics, only that instead of Africa or India that I try Central America.

Following my physician's advice I sailed for Barbadoes and then for Belize, and after getting the general lay of the country and picking up two good natives and four burros for my outfit I set out for the interior intending to do a little gold prospecting, a little collecting and if possible to get some fine jaguar skins. Though the region is not noted as a sporting country it is a very fine one. Sir George Ramsden went there regularly until he was killed by a jaguar and he told me at one time that he was never fifty miles beyond civilization and often wondered what lay beyond. There is a popular idea that when one can pick up a map and see a country outlined, see the mountains and rivers marked off and see towns jotted down that the country has been explored and is familiar to the geographers. This is erroneous. There are millions of square miles on the face of the earth of which the knowledge of the white man is very slight indeed. I determined to explore the section to the west and in so doing I encountered the greatest adventure of my none too peaceful life.

I hit it in mind to strike southwest to the Cockscomb mountains, hunt down their northwestern face to the border and explore the Pasion River the headwaters of the magnificent Usamacinia River, one of the most important systems on the American continent, and yet hardly known to civilization, but about the time I left British territory I was tired of struggling with the jungle and finding more open country off in the general direction of Lake Peten I changed my course intending to renew my supplies at Flores or to push on to Tical on the headwaters of the Hondo river, then swing around into the great unknown country to the north. The fourth day as I moved due northwest I came to a stream that I am convinced is the headwaters of the Old River, fully forty miles from the supposed locality of it and by the end of the month, having missed Lake Peten entirely, I was traveling in a country that drained to the west instead of the east, whereby I knew that even the general line of the watershed of the Yucatanian peninsula has not been properly placed by the geographers.

The shooting had been fine and my greatest trouble was with the jungle, as there would be points in our journey when the forests of lignum vitae, mahogany, eucalyptus and gum trees, etc., were so dense that they would have been hard traveling, even if not been bound together by the creepers. These made almost impassable masses of growth through which we hewed our way with big knives, sometimes making only two or three miles a day.

Waked by a Native Dog.

One night shortly after we had camped, I heard a scuttling noise in the undergrowth, but supposed it was only some snake or armadillo traveling around our fire and paid no further heed till Jose touched me on the shoulder and I turned my head to look where he was pointing. Standing in the grass up to his eyes, looking at us in our hammocks, was what was unmistakably a dog. Very soon he began to bark and all doubts about him vanished. He was a typical native dog. What could he be doing there in the forest? Jose surmised that we were near some remote Maya village but that did not seem possible to me and so we went to sleep.

Sometime in the night I felt something tightening around my arms and shoulders and endeavored to spring from my hammock. I was bound fast in it. Then I heard a wild yell from Jose. It was so dark that my observations were all confused. Why was there no light from the fire? Suddenly I

saw the reason. A heap of rank green had been thrown on it. A flame burst through for a moment and by its light I saw forty or fifty able bodied Mayas almost nude taking possession of me and my outfit. Nowhere could I see Jose. I was so trussed up that a part of my own hammock gagged me and though my Luger pistol was pressed close against my stomach by the hammock, I could not move to get hold of it. The band had stolen on us in the night and darkened our fire, then effected an easy capture of everything except Jose, it appeared. The whole matter puzzled me completely as I had not supposed there were any dangerous natives in that region and travelers are rarely attacked for purpose of robbery. So far as Jose was concerned I supposed that he had been awakened by the approach of the band and had been able to escape into the jungle after trying to alarm me by shouting.

Whatever the situation was, as soon as they had loaded up the burros and had collected everything pertaining to the outfit, the young chief ordered me seated sideways on a burro and we set to the east. They were evidently entirely familiar with modern fire arms for my gun case seemed to please them greatly. I noticed that two of their number seemed to have been wounded. One showed an unmistakable gun-shot wound in the shoulder half healed and another had his head bound up. Some

gathered that I had fallen into the hands of a band of Maya rebels and my heart sank within me. My fears were not assuaged by the behavior of a young man obviously the brother of the chief of the band. He was anxious to display himself in some way and taking an old well-worn henequen knife, whetted to razorlike keenness, he approached me and with deft swings and cuts lopped off all the protruding ends of cord, etc., that he could without loosening me. He trimmed me as neatly as he would a hough and then amused himself by seeing how close he could swing the blade to my nose without touching it.

The women and children and nearly all of the men went back to bed soon, and nature so asserted herself that I, too, dropped into a doze and did not awaken till dawn. Then I discovered something else that pleased me greatly. In trimming me down, the young Maya had cut off too much from one of the principal knots and whenever I chose I could separate it by filling out my chest.

They appeared to have but a small supply of food and the signs of more wounded stretched in an outdoor hospital under the trees convinced me that they had been hard pressed by government troops at no late date and had retreated into the fastnesses of the forest. For two days we had been living on our carried water supply and I was curious

When the bottom of the cave was reached beside the underground stream I found all my traps except the guns and ammunition and the food boxes all ready heaped up there and I was laid on the sand beside them.

Imprisoned in the Underground Cave.

Perhaps it is as well that I should explain the nature of a cenote. In the region in which I had penetrated began the great underground rivers of Yucatan. There seems to be a highly porous layer of soil from ten to a thousand feet in thickness through which the water sinks so rapidly that it forms in no pools or streams on the surface. Underneath, however, is a clay and stone bed and on this the streams form under ground and run away under the earth only the great Creator that made them knows where. All over the region are spots where the earth has fallen in leaving a hole with running water at the bottom and in some places there are winding caves hundreds of feet deep. For centuries the natives have descended to the water by rude wooden ladders. It was in one of these caves, a room about sixty feet across that I found myself. I could see up to the entrance of the hole not over seventy feet above me. On one side the dark stream ran slowly and on the other was a sort of sand and gravel bank. Superstition prevents an Indian from remain-

ing there. I am very fond of it at any rate, and though an indifferent pistol shot I knew from shooting game with it that I could expect results nearly the same as from a rifle, as a modern magazine pistol of the Luger type is so balanced that even the most indifferent shot will score well. I made up my mind to make every one of the nine shots in each magazine charge count for one of the bronzed devils that had trapped me.



I SAW FORTY OR FIFTY ABLE BODIED MAYAS, ALMOST NUDE, TAKING POSSESSION OF ME.

of them were armed with old style rifles and some with pistols, but all had great hooked henequen knives, weapons that are terrifically effective in the hands of men trained to use them. The quiet deliberate manner in which they had gone about the capture and their silence were in marked contrast with many other native raids which I have witnessed or known of.

Captured by Maya Rebels.

By the light of the torches I could make out that we were in a clearing in which two ruined buildings of one of the old towns stood and that the band appeared to be camped in the buildings. I saw a large number of other wounded men and one of the fellows who was guarding me wore a part of the outfit of a Mexican regionale and carried a fine Mauser rifle. From all of this I

as to what theirs was. Very soon I knew.

When the sun was about an hour high the chief called together a number of the older men and they held a long conference concerning me. At last one approached and addressed me in a Spanish patois, asking me about the troops of Gen. Flores and where they were moving. When I replied in Spanish, I noticed the listeners exchanging glances. I told them who I was, what I was doing in the country and that I knew nothing about the federal troops. When I said this the chief laughed at me and thrust in my face the papers I had got from the Mexican consul in Belize. The chief could not read the papers which he had found in my belongings, nor could any of his band, but on the envelope was blazoned the Mexican crest and colors and on the papers was the Mexican seal. I saw that I was convicted by circumstantial evidence of having something to do with the Mexican government. Nothing I could say seemed to change this opinion and at last the chief ordered me taken away. I supposed I was to be macheted at once and pulled my nerves together for the finish, little dreaming that something far more cruel was in his mind. They carried me down a little decline and there was the entrance of a cenote or water hole and down this I was taken on the rude ladder that afforded means of descent.

ing underground any longer than is absolutely necessary, so in a few minutes I was left alone though I knew that there must be a guard mounted at the entrance of the cenote.

I resolved to make a desperate struggle for my life and without further ado threw off my bonds and began to reconnoiter my position. To my delight, I found that while my food boxes had been taken there was a selected case of canned goods in plain tins that the Indians had left with my instruments. They did not know they contained food. A brilliant idea came to me.

The Mayas must have the water from the cenote and I could keep them from it!

I had my Luger pistol, more than two hundred rounds of ammunition, and the Mayas could descend only one at a time. I had food, water, shelter and could stand a three weeks siege. I could drive them to seek another source of water supply. If there was one close, I was done, for they could keep me imprisoned until my supplies should be exhausted and keep themselves supplied with water from the other water hole. If there was none nearer than several miles they would hardly try to supply a garrison at the mouth of the hole with water brought from such a distance.

My gratitude over having brought my Luger with me and having had it over-looked when I was captured was ex-

I did not have long to sit idle. Someone was coming down the ladder and I waited until the view was complete. Two of the men of the band appeared with some freshly cut stakes and some things. They were coming to take me and stake me out. I waited until they stood side by side on the first landing, looking down in the dark and then I cracked!

The one fell silently, killed instantly, and the other screamed like a wounded panther as he came down, but the fall finished him.

Instantly there was great excitement above and in another moment or two I could hear all the voices stilled. They had formulated some quick plan. I was an attempt to rush me. A half dozen of the most agile came down, one after the other, as rapidly as they could descend. One slipped and fell and I dropped the ladder before he reached the first landing. The second, though I put two of the big steel jacketed bullets in him, clung to the ladder and blocked the descent of the others. They made an effort to turn and ascend but before they got out I had wounded two of them badly.

That is not nice work. I have seen and participated in my share of bloodshed in battle and in the outlands, but I relate this mankilling incident with anything but a boastful spirit.

The desperate situation in which they were, they must now have realized. Ev-

erything was absolutely quiet till the hole grew dark and I knew it was night. I moved over to a point where I could see the stars through the aperture and once a man appeared as if to make a descent. My bullet that flew past him must have deterred them from any such attempt.

In those tense quiet hours with every nerve strained I had abundant time to think clearly. I realized that I must dispose of the dead bodies and there was but one way that I could do it. They must go down the stream. I explored the exit of the stream and saw that there was no reason why they should not float away if buoyed up so as to be just half submerged. If they floated fully on the top of the water they would catch on the top of the natural conduit and if they went lower they would ground and sink. By plastering the nostrils and mouths with clay I closed the apertures that would admit water and after a little experimenting with weighting with stones I set the weird, ghastly craft on their dark journey into the bowels of the earth.

The thing that smote my heart with a chill was the knowledge that there was one fatal weakness in my position. There was no one to stand guard for me while I slept and sooner or later I must sleep.

Overcome by Sleep.

The remainder of the night and the whole of the second day passed and the only thing that kept me aware that the camp had not moved to another water supply was the sound of voices to be heard now and then. That third night, however, there was absolute silence and I hope I may never be so fortunate to endure the torture that I passed through fighting off the slow approach of slumber. I do not recall the morning of the fourth day clearly but I must have fallen asleep, so profoundly, asleep that it did not disturb me when they came down the ladder, picked me up, bound hand and foot, and carried me out. The first thing I recall is feeling a sharp blow in the face. The widow of one of the men I had killed had stamped me in the face with her naked foot.

I knew that the struggle was all over, that I had played the game and lost through my own weakness and I went back to sleep, strange as it may seem. When I awoke there was a terrible sense of oppression that was the dominant thing in my sensations and I felt as though I were dried and baked while terrible pains shot through my chest and back, the pains of a vast weariness. I realized that I was gasping for breath, and I opened my eyes shocked into a realization of my terrible plight.

Those fiends had carried out their intentions of staking me out. They had waited until the sun was declining and then had stretched me out on the naked top of a hill, my arms and legs spread out and my wrists and ankles tied to stakes driven in the ground. The dry things cut deep into my flesh. This was not the worst thing they had done, however. With care they had selected a stone somewhat larger than my two fists and had laid it on my chest. It was not a heavy load but each time I breathed as I must breathe when lying flat on my back, my respiratory muscles must lift that stone and sooner or later the extra effort would tire them to the point of exhaustion. I shuddered with horror when I realized that at last the muscles would refuse to act at all and with my mouth and nostrils gaping for breath I should smother because I could not take in the free air.

Already I was suffering terribly from the strain on my breathing functions. I had slept enough that I had regained my mental faculties and I watched the rising and falling load on my chest wondering just how many hours it would be till I could raise it no longer. All around me on the brush and wheeling in the air above were the horrible vultures. Staking out is an old and familiar method of execution among the Indians of the sub-tropic and doubtless the vultures knew full well when they saw my executors placing me on the hill top that in a little while there would be a good meal for them.

The coming of night was some relief and I found that by using my diaphragm I could rest my intercostal muscles to some extent. I knew I was merely prolonging my agony but some-

how in all the close corners in which I have ever been hope has not entirely died within me at any time. After what seemed years, dawn came, and then the sun rose and it began to grow warmer. All feeling was gone from my feet and hands save that they were big centers of throbbing pain. As the pitiless sun mounted the arc and its rays fell full on me I realized that I could not hope to last much longer. The vultures appeared to be well aware of this fact and constantly hovered nearer. I found myself wondering if they would treat me as I had seen others treated, lips ripped off and eyes dug out before any other part of the body was touched.

It was approaching the rainy season but the first great storm had not yet come, though clouds gathered every day and how I prayed for a cloud to rise and shield me from that blasting, withering sunshine. A perspiration that sprang out made breathing easier and I realized that were it not for the sun I might even have lasted the day out but gradually my senses began to go, the whole scene became one rolling, tossing phantasmagoria of terrible shapes and men and things in awful pain. I was aware that I was raising my head and trying to bite the stone lying on my chest, then I began to forget and thoroughly aware that the end was at hand, I lost consciousness in the act of studying and observing my own mental processes in so doing. One thought was to try to perceive the moment when my soul left my body. I was eager for that mental experience.

What did happen though was that I came sharply to myself again, feeling beating wings in my face, feeling that awful weight slipping from my chest up under my chin. A great vulture was just rising away from me. My face was bleeding where his beak had struck my cheek. There was great excitement among the others. In alighting he had perched on the stone on my chest, had struck me and as I started or moved he had attempted to rise giving the stone a push with his feet that displaced it. With a little shaking of my head I got it off entirely and slowly my natural breathing began to supervene. The sky was clouding now and in a little while I dropped into a deep sleep.

Freed at Last.

When I awoke it was dark. The first storm of the rainy season had broken and it was the downpour of rain in my face that stirred me. Before I realized where I was and how I was situated I attempted to rise and the stake holding my right hand pulled out of the rain softened ground. I was able to turn on one side and after a long and patient work pull the other hand free. After a while I was able to pull my leg stakes out and Heavens, what a fight I put up to keep life in my body till the night was over and I could move, to make an effort at escape from the vicinity of the band of Mayas. I went from bush to bush in the dark, draining the rain water out of the hollowed leaves until my thirst was slaked and with the first light of dawn I began the hunt for food. The popular idea of the tropics has one point of fallacy. It is common belief among people who have never been in the tropical wilds that every other tree is a palm, banana, bread fruit or such tree that bears something fit to eat. The truth of the matter is that food bearing trees are rare and the birds and monkeys keep them stripped. It is only when man has planted them that there is an abundance. I kept on the hunt, however, until I had filled my stomach and then I began to take my bearings.

After two hours creeping through the jungle guiding my way by the slope of the watershed I felt that I was near the location of the ruined buildings and began to move with great care. I made up my mind that I could not set off across country without arms or supplies and the one way to prepare myself was to play a strategic game. I could hide in the jungle near the game till I had some opportunity of waylaying some straggler or of stealing in and getting what I must have. It was a desperate, desperate thing to do and I think that with all my efforts to keep a strong hand on my self that I must have been half mad.

Slowly I crept nearer the place, approaching from the side on which the cenote was situated. There was no one about the water hole and making a detour I was soon near enough to begin to tell that they, too, were apparently deserted. Long and carefully I listened and watched and when satisfied that the band had departed I ventured forth openly.

From the scattered trappings and from my own boxes of instruments I got together a makeshift outfit, rigged some bird snares, made myself a rude knife, contrived a water bottle, and shared myself a stout club and with all the scraps of food I could collect I struck out in the direction of Chinchancha.

It must have been about a week later that I became aware, as I made my way across the short brush country of the arid section of Yucatan, that there was something or someone following me. I hid behind a clump of bushes and waited. In a moment there stole out of the growth a henequen planter who had seen me from horseback at a distance and had dismounted to stalk me, wondering what strange creature I could be. At sight of him I sprang forward and dropped unconsciously before I reached him and when I recovered consciousness it was weeks later in the hospital at Merida.

This was the man I saw from the deck of the ship as I sailed from Southampton and I hope if he reads these lines that he will write to me, care of the Lambs' Club, New York City and give me the opportunity of thanking him for rescuing a fellow human being in desperate straits.